

Reference Checking for Hiring Officials - Sample Questions **TEMPLATE**

Check candidates' references before you make a selection decision and sign and return the certificate of eligibles. Reference checking is valuable because it allows you or your designee (e.g., team leader, HR professional) to:

- Verify information in the candidate's application package and/or interview
- Gather information that helps predict the candidate's success on the job
- Gain additional job-related information about a candidate's knowledge, skills, abilities and competencies

Below, you will find information about reference checking, including answers to frequently asked questions, the three basic steps to conducting reference checks, and a list of sample questions. Consider using the sample list to create a set of questions to fit your needs.

Frequently Asked Questions about Reference Checks

Who should conduct reference checks?

- ☒ Hiring official or their designee (e.g., team leader, HR professional)

How many references should be contacted?

- ☒ At least 2

Contacting multiple references may provide different perspectives on a candidate's knowledge, skills, abilities and competencies.

Most candidates provide three references. If those references are not available, or if you want additional perspectives, you can ask the candidate for more references.

Who should serve as a reference?

- ☒ Previous supervisor(s)
- ☒ Current supervisor (if you have the candidate's permission)
- ☒ Coworker(s)
- ☒ Professor(s)
- ☒ Other, as applicable

The reference should have been in a position to directly observe the candidate's performance and be of a professional nature (e.g., work, school, military, volunteer) and not personal nature (e.g., friends, relatives).

References who have had the most recent contact with the candidate may be better able to provide specific and accurate feedback. Less recent references may not be aware of new skills the candidate may have developed. However, there may be circumstances where a less

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recent reference has the best knowledge of the knowledge, skills, abilities and competencies that are most important for the position to be filled.

Should I obtain a candidate's consent to check their references?

- ☒ Yes

When you ask a candidate to provide references, you should obtain their permission to contact their references. Consent can be granted via language on the job application (e.g., a statement that all information provided by a candidate will be verified); the Declaration for Federal Employment form ([OF-306](#)), or a similar agency-developed form; or during the interview.

What if the candidate requests that their current supervisor not be contacted?

- ☒ Ask for alternate references

This is a common request (and is often an option within online staffing systems). One option is to ask if you may contact their current supervisor once a tentative offer has been extended.

Developing Questions for References

What should I consider when planning my questions?

- ☒ Develop questions relevant to the position under consideration
- ☒ Ensure questions are open-ended and based on behavior that references are likely to have observed
- ☒ Consider time constraints when deciding how many questions to ask
- ☒ Consider how long it will take the references to answer the questions
- ☒ Keep the list of questions to a manageable number

For example, if the position requires the candidate to adhere to strict guidelines, asking a reference about the candidate's ability to follow work procedures might be appropriate.

Calling References

How should I contact references?

- ☒ Telephone

The preferred way to contact a reference is by phone. When you contact the reference, briefly tell the reference who you are and why you are calling. Let the reference know the candidate has given permission to have his or her references checked.

Ask the reference if they have time to speak with you. If not, then arrange a call at a time that is more convenient.

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At the beginning of the conversation, provide a brief overview of the position being filled and an estimate of how long the call will take. Begin with the basic questions (e.g., reference's relation to the candidate, candidate's title and dates of employment), then move on to more in-depth questions.

What if the reference refuses to provide any information?

- ☒ Ask the candidate to provide another reference

Some agency policies do not allow the release of a previous employee's information. At a minimum, references may only be able to provide a start date, an end date, and the position title. If you are not able to get the information you are seeking, you can ask the candidate to provide another reference.

Can I call references provided by the candidate's references?

- ☒ Ask the candidate for consent to contact the new references

A reference provided by the candidate may, in turn, refer you to other individuals who can provide additional information. Asking the candidate for consent to contact the new references demonstrates consideration for the candidate.

Handling Reference Information

What is the best way to handle the information gathered from a reference check?

- ☒ Check with your HR department for guidance

Your agency may have policies or guidelines for maintaining this information.

While checking references, it is possible the candidate may view a situation, interaction, or goal accomplishment differently than a reference; consequently, some discrepancies may emerge. Clarify with the candidate any conflicting information received by the references.

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Suggested Reference Checking Steps

Step 1

- ☒ Decide who will conduct the reference check
- ☒ Develop questions for references

Step 2

- ☒ Inform candidates you will be checking their references and request permission if not already obtained (e.g., [OF-306 Declaration for Federal Employment](#))
- ☒ Contact references
- ☒ Contact additional references, as applicable
- ☒ Clarify with the candidate any conflicting information received by the references

Step 3

- ☒ Ensure materials are stored and retained according to agency policy

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Sample Questions

- ☐ For how long and in what context have you known (*Name of Candidate*) professionally?
- ☐ What was/is (*Name of Candidate*) position and responsibilities?
- ☐ In what capacity did/do you work with (*Name of Candidate*) (e.g., peer, colleague, supervisor)?
- ☐ Could you give me a brief description of the duties (*Name of Candidate*) performed?
- ☐ Describe (*Name of Candidate*) strengths.
- ☐ What were/are (*Name of Candidate*) weaknesses or areas where (*Name of Candidate*) could improve?
- ☐ How well did/does (*Name of Candidate*) know the work? How well did/does (*Name of Candidate*) perform on the job?
- ☐ How well did/does (*Name of Candidate*) manage the workload?
- ☐ How would you describe (*Name of Candidate*) work relationships with co-workers, subordinates, and supervisors?
- ☐ What kind of work-related training, certificates, education, or other qualifications does (*Name of Candidate*) have?
- ☐ Would you consider (*Name of Candidate*) to be reliable and dependable? Did/does (*Name of Candidate*) do what he/she says they will? Did/does (*Name of Candidate*) follow through?
- ☐ How did/does (*Name of Candidate*) handle significant and ongoing changes in the scope of work, if applicable?
- ☐ How did/does (*Name of Candidate*) work under pressure?
- ☐ Is (*Name of Candidate*) eligible for re-hire in your organization?
- ☐ Is there anything else you can tell me about (*Name of Candidate*) ability to perform his/her job?
- ☐ Whom else might I speak with who could tell me about (*Name of Candidate*) work?